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Gordon and the Sudan: Prologue to the Mahdiyya, 1877–1880

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Gordon and the Sudan: Prologue to the Mahdiyya, 1877–1880

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Alice Moore-Harell, Gordon and the Sudan: Prologue to the Mahdiyya, 1877-1880,
Foreword by Gabriel Warburg (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001). Pp. xvi + 286.
£39.50/\$54.50 hardcover.

Reviewed by Heather J. Sharkey, Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies,
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Alice Moore-Harell's book is a carefully researched study of one chapter in the career of General Charles Gordon, the military careerist who remains one of the most compelling figures in the history of late nineteenth-century British imperialism. Drawing on an extensive pool of archival sources from Europe, Egypt, and North America, the book considers the period of three years, from 1877 to 1880, when Gordon served as Governor-General of the Turco-Egyptian Sudan, a territory that had been conquered, incrementally expanded, and ruled by the armies of Egypt's Muhammad Ali dynasty beginning in 1820.

In 1877, Khedive Ismail asked Gordon to administer the Sudan with a special mandate to end the slave trade (though not slavery itself) in accordance with a convention that Egypt had recently signed. Gordon accepted on condition that he be granted authority to direct all the provincial governors and to report exclusively to the khedive – thereby demanding a degree of centralized control unknown by previous governors-general in the Sudan.

Gordon's governor-generalship coincided with a fascinating moment in Egyptian, British, and Sudanese history. The Turco-Egyptian empire was at its greatest

geographical extent. Indeed, the Sudanese territories entrusted to Gordon included parts of what are now Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Egyptian finances were nevertheless suffering, making Egypt vulnerable to French and British economic and political encroachment. Against this context, Gordon worked to consolidate the Sudan's administration and placed the country on an independent financial footing for the first time since 1820 – a necessity given that Egypt's treasury was in no state to offer subventions.

Conditions for Gordon were less than ideal. Many officials in both Egypt and the Sudan resented his sweeping mandate as well as his status as a Briton and Christian, and therefore undermined or ignored his efforts. Since many Egyptians regarded the Sudan as a punishment posting, morale among administrators was low while corruption (especially bribery and extortionate taxation) was rampant. Meanwhile, efforts to combat the slave trade were hindered by the limited reach of the army (itself filled with slave conscripts), the adept organization of the slave merchants, and the participation of some Turco-Egyptian officials in the traffic. It made matters more difficult still that slave-owning itself was widely accepted and practiced within Sudanese Muslim society.

Moore-Harell describes Gordon as a political reformer who tried to establish a more locally responsive and conciliatory government. Reversing longstanding Turco-Egyptian policies that had sought to marginalize Sudanese Sufi leaders, Gordon adopted a tolerant attitude towards Sudanese Islam and included more Sudanese in his administration. He worked to develop local infrastructures, for example, by improving Khartoum's sewer system and water supply. He tried to root out corruption, albeit with

limited success. More symbolically, perhaps, he affixed a suggestion and complaint box to the gates of his palace so that the people could express their concerns.

Moore-Harell asserts that Gordon was neither a tool of British interests nor a modern Christian crusader – though many authors over the years have portrayed him in just this way. Gordon, she argues, acted with local interests in mind while remaining loyal to khedivial, not British, authority. Out of deference to and respect for local Muslim society, she mentions, Gordon forbade the Church Missionary Society (a British Anglican organization) from proselytizing among Sudanese Muslims, though he did allow them to pass through the country en route to non-Muslim regions in what is now Uganda.

Frustrated by the problems of administration and lacking an affinity to Khedive Tawfiq who succeeded Ismail in 1879, Gordon resigned his governor-generalship in January 1880. Given his brief tenure, what, then, was the import of his rule, and how should historians consider it in light of the Sudanese history that followed? Although the book's sub-title suggests that Gordon's rule in the Sudan was a "prologue to the Mahdiyya" (anticipating though not in itself causing the Mahdist revolution), Moore-Harell makes the more interesting argument within the book that Gordon's governor-generalship anticipated British colonial (Anglo-Egyptian era) policies in certain respects – notably, in early attempts to isolate the southern provinces from the influence of northern traders with consequences for north-south dynamics. She suggests, too, that Gordon's experiment in centralized administration and financial self-sufficiency was an early episode in Sudan autonomy. Extending her argument further, one could argue that some of the problems that Gordon encountered remain problems for the Sudanese central

government today – notably, the challenge of maintaining effective control over a vast country with limited, inadequate resources.

Moore-Harell may not have been an admirer of Charles Gordon when she embarked on this project, but she became one by the end. Until Gordon's last day in office, she writes, he "invested all his energy in efforts to improve the public administration and to better the life of the Sudanese "(p. 53). She concludes, "Justice, honesty, loyalty, perseverance, open ears, involvement in communal life, and the empathy he demonstrated, symbolised a new approach to the [Sudanese] population. He proved that it was possible to institute a different administration, [and] that the Sudanese were entitled to an honest and honourable life without suffering from oppression...." (p. 233) Focussing on a brief historical moment of dramatic political change, *Gordon and the Sudan* is a fascinating book that will appeal to historians of Egypt, Sudan, and the British Empire while perhaps also explaining some of Gordon's enduring mystique.

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Note: the department has moved to this Market Street address for the 2003-4 year only, pending renovations to its regular building.